

Gabriel Farrell

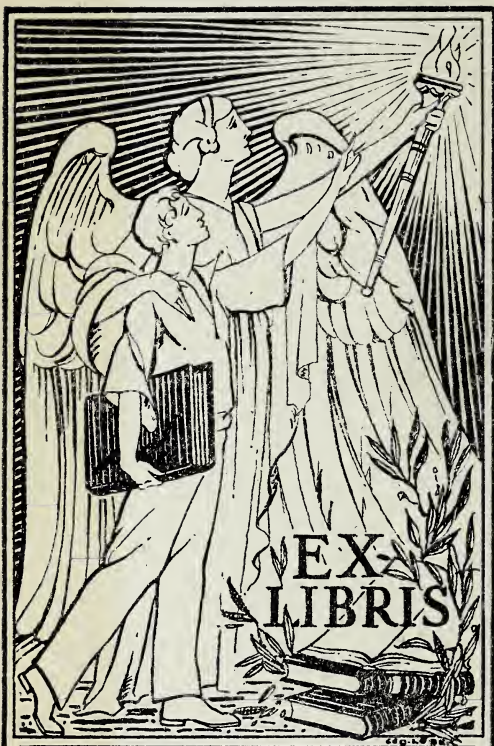
The state and the blind

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
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THE STATE AND THE
BLIND



PERKINS INSTITUTION
and
MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND
Watertown, Massachusetts

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Visitors Welcome



The School may be visited any afternoon except Saturday and Sunday. Guides will take visitors to the classrooms and about the buildings and grounds, if an appointment is made in advance.

Perkins Institution is situated in Watertown, east of the square, and by auto may be reached at 175 No. Beacon St. (Route 20) or from the Charles Riverway. The Boston Elevated serves Perkins at Beechwood Ave., on the Arsenal St. Line from Central Square.

THE STATE AND THE BLIND

by

Gabriel Farrell

A Broadcast

October 27, 1937

IN this second broadcast of the series under the auspices of the Massachusetts League of Women Voters I have been asked to speak on the provision that the State makes for the blind. While the major part of my talk must be about the education of blind children, because that happens to be my special province, I do want at the outset to tell a little about the provision that is made for the child before reaching school age and, also, what is done for the blind after they have completed their schooling.

At the outset of every life the Commonwealth concerns itself with possible blindness. A State law passed two years ago requires that at the time of birth drops shall be administered to the eyes of all children in order to eliminate any possibility of the development of what is known as "babies' sore eyes." While this has been a routine practice of physicians of the State for quite a long time, it is only within two years

that it has been made compulsory by law. Fifty years ago "babies' sore eyes" was one of the chief causes of blindness, but through the administering of drops at birth the loss of sight from this cause has been remarkably reduced. In 1908, 28% of the pupils in the American schools for the blind lost their sight in this way, but by 1932 this number had been reduced to 7½%. Even this small percentage ought to be reduced further and blindness from this source completely eliminated.

When, however, a little baby is blinded or is born without sight, provision must be made for his guidance and care. Ideally, it is best during infancy for such children to remain in their homes under the care of well-informed parents. In many cases, however, this is neither possible nor practical and institutional care must be provided. Here in Massachusetts such care is given at the Boston Nursery for Blind Babies which has a well-equipped and beautiful home on South Huntington Avenue, overlooking the Fenway. The Boston Nursery cares for the little blind baby providing guidance and opportunity for physical development and sense training until the child reaches five years of age, when the

transfer is made to the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind.

Before talking with you about the provision that is made at the Perkins Institution, let me jump to the other end of the ladder of life and speak briefly of the provision that the State makes for blind persons after school age. It is during this period of life that the Commonwealth makes its largest and most effective contribution. This is due, primarily, to the fact that the Boston Nursery, as a private organization, and the Perkins Institution, as a semi-public school, make such good provision for blind children that direct State action is not necessary in Massachusetts.

The Adult Blind

Care for the adult blind falls to the Division of the Blind, of the Department of Education, of the Commonwealth. The Division maintains offices at 110 Tremont Street, Boston, under the direction of Mr. William H. McCarthy. Mr. McCarthy is, himself, without sight and a graduate of Perkins Institution. Because of that he has wise understanding of the problems of

the blind and administers his office in an effective and helpful way. Among those under his direction are the field workers who send children to Perkins and attempt to find employment for them when they leave, and a number of blind home teachers who travel about the Commonwealth to visit the blind in their homes giving instruction in the reading of braille. The home teachers also teach handicrafts and develop skills whereby persons without sight can fill their time in an active and, very often, in a profitable way by making articles which can be sold. To further this work the Division holds sales from time to time to enable the blind to dispose of their products.

Over and above this form of instruction and encouragement, there is, of course, the financial aid that the blind receive through the generosity of the Commonwealth and, more recently, through supplementary funds provided under the Social Security Act. Here in Massachusetts we have not adopted any blanket form of pension which carries with it the stigma of dependency. Instead, the field workers consider each case and money is given in the spirit of supplementary aid to help the blind

help themselves. This enables our blind people to maintain their self-respect and it encourages them to feel that even without sight they are still useful and honorable citizens of the Commonwealth.

Another institution which plays a vital part in the effort to prevent blindness and to ameliorate the conditions of those who have defective vision is the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, which is a part of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Here we find every provision for the correction of eye difficulties and for hospitalization of those whose sight calls for operation for improvement, or for measures which will conserve remaining vision. Although this is not a State institution, Massachusetts has every reason to be proud of it and those of us who are concerned about the blind want to pay tribute to the part it plays in our united effort toward the conquest of blindness.

Perkins — A School

Now, I would like to take our listeners back to that period of life which is, perhaps, the most important for it is the time when habits are formed, attitudes developed, and preparation is given for the later years — when we

must wrestle with the real problems of daily living. Responsibility for school children without sight, or with such defective vision that they cannot attend our regular schools is given to Perkins Institution, which serves all of the New England States except Connecticut which has its own school.

Samuel Gridley Howe, the first director, undertook his work in 1831 with the conviction that blindness was an obstacle that could be overcome and that with adequate education the blind could become contributory members of society. This conviction of Dr. Howe's is the foundation stone of all work for the blind in America and we, in Massachusetts, have reason to be proud, not only of the fact that it originated here, but that we have demonstrated over and over again that it may be realized in fact.

Perkins Institution holds its charter from the Legislature of Massachusetts and the Governor of the Commonwealth annually appoints four of its twelve trustees. Perkins does not, however, receive direct financial aid from the State. An annual tuition fee of six hundred dollars is charged for each child and in practically all cases this fee is paid by

the state sending the child. This fee, however, covers only part of the cost of instruction and living. The remainder of expense is met by income from bequests and gifts. This combination of support from the states and from philanthropic people has enabled Perkins to give to the blind of New England the best possible education.

As a school Perkins begins with the Kindergarten and continues through the High School. If you were to visit us in Watertown, you would find two groups of buildings. On one side of the grounds is a group of houses built around a beautiful courtyard. These buildings house the Lower School, that is, the kindergarten and the first six grades. There are four houses, each accommodating about twenty-eight people, forming a small group in which normal family life may be approximated.

The Upper School

When the children complete the sixth grade they come to the second group of buildings on the grounds — those which house the Upper School. Here we find the school divided into two groups, the Junior High and the Senior High. During the Junior High we give exploratory

and general courses because we are trying not only to widen the basis of knowledge, but also to find any aptitudes which can be developed for life work. The Senior High is divided into five departments: general, college preparatory, musical, commercial and vocational. Through these five courses we give to our boys and girls a wide choice of training and an opportunity to develop what aptitudes they possess and to begin certain pre-vocational work which will equip them for later life work.

Some may be surprised to find that we include a college preparatory course, but we need it because a number of our boys and girls have the ability and the ambition to attend college. At the present time we have one young man, totally without sight, who is a senior in Harvard. Each morning he leaves Perkins, takes the trolley car for Harvard Square, attends his classes, returns home in the evening, and is doing work which meets the standards of that great university. We have, also, a number of young men who are attending the various schools of Boston University. Two or three years ago one of our graduates entered the University, at-

tended law school and was graduated at the head of his class. Now he is a successful attorney. Other graduates attend Radcliffe, the New England Conservatory of Music, the New England Nursing Training School and the Boston School of Occupational Therapy.

In the commercial field the most promising occupations are typing and Ediphone operating. Two of our graduates are Ediphone operators and instructors in braille for two different Massachusetts Chapters of the American Red Cross and another is an Ediphone operator at the office of the Catholic Guild for the Blind. The Commonwealth has recently passed special legislation requiring opportunities for work of this kind in State offices to be given to blind persons.

The Fundamental Skills

Pupils completing work in the Vocational Department acquire a number of the fundamental skills which the blind have used for a long time, such as, mattress making, chair caning, woodwork, basketry and weaving. These occupations are sometimes practiced in groups but, more often, they are pursued

at home with the products sold through the sales which were previously mentioned.

Perhaps one of the best known departments in the education of the blind is the Music Department. For many years music has occupied a prominent place in the instruction of the sightless. This is not only because of the pleasure which blind persons may derive from it but also because it is an art in which they can compete on equal terms with those who have sight. Among our graduates are a number who have succeeded as composers, performers or as teachers.

A very practical branch of the Music Department is that devoted to piano tuning. For a long time this craft has been successfully followed by blind men. For over fifty years tuners trained by Perkins have cared for all the pianos in the Boston school system. In addition, many of our tuners have built up private businesses of their own. You may be interested to know that one of our most outstanding graduates began his business career as a tuner. Leaving Perkins with only a tuner's kit he built up the largest piano business in the Dominion of Canada, and for his philan-

thropic enterprises and in recognition of his contribution to his country the late King George knighted him and he is now known as Sir Charles W. Lindsay.

The Commonwealth Helps

Here, again, the Commonwealth has helped by passing special legislation making it mandatory for all pianos owned by city, county, or State authorities to be serviced by blind tuners engaged through the State Division of the Blind. Under this same legislation it is required that all mattresses in State institutions be remade by blind labor. As the State has no shop in this part of the State for the remaking of mattresses, this work is done for the Division in the Perkins Workshop in South Boston. This is just another example of how the State and Perkins work together for the common interest of the blind.

One might go on telling more and more about Perkins Institution, but let me conclude by pointing out one or two things. We look upon our Institution not merely as a school where the three R's are taught by the special methods that are needed when sight is lacking, but we consider it a place where those

whose lives have been darkened must be inspired to think clearly and to have the vision and determination to be successful in life.

With our facilities and generous State support we are able to give the blind youth of New England every educational advantage. What the blind need today is larger opportunity to use the training which we are able to give and only public-spirited citizens can offer this. We would ask you, therefore, to try and patronize the blind when you can, not to be afraid to give them employment when opportunity opens, and to realize that the loss of sight is something that can be overcome and that compensations can be built up which will enable blind persons to do many things as effectively as persons with sight.

I am glad of this opportunity to speak under the auspices of the League of Women Voters because I know that they have a genuine interest in the Commonwealth and in all of its people and will want to support and sustain everything that can be done for the blind.

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